

7b. WOMEN IN TAMIL NADU

***“Development if not engendered
is indeed endangered”***

- UNFPA India report 1997

Tamilnadu Govt. has consistently claimed the superiority of its schemes for women’s welfare, vis-à-vis other States. While schemes are aplenty, the ground reality of women in Tamilnadu, among clearly identifiable sections, remains a grave area of concern. The fact that, with all its numberless schemes, Tamilnadu stands number one in the country in terms of women in prisons, is a grim reminder that a rights-based approach and women’s perspectives are clearly missing in the State Govt’s approach to women’s welfare in Tamilnadu.

As per the 1991 Census there were 275,59,791 women in Tamilnadu, constituting 49.34% of the total population.

Sex Ratio (General Population)

Sex ratio (females per 1000 males) is a simple but very strong index of the long-term status of women’s welfare in a community. But contrary to international experience of economic development turning the sex ratio more favorable to women, more than 50 years of economic development in India has only been leading to worsening of the sex ratio for women.

Sex Ratios in Tamilnadu (1901-91)		
Year	Tamilnadu	India
1901	1044	972
1951	1007	946
1961	992	941
1971	978	930
1981	977	934
1991	974	927

(Statistical Handbook of TN 1998)

The sex ratio has been declining almost steadily in India from 1901 to 1991, except for a small rise in the 1981 census, in all the States, except Kerala. In Tamilnadu too the sex ratio has sharply fallen from 1007 in 1951 to 974 in 1991.

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The inter-district variations in sex ratio in Tamilnadu have been very striking. Nilgiris has the highest sex ratio of 1001 and Theni has the lowest 882. Besides Theni, the other districts, which exhibit poor sex ratios, are Salem (914), Dindugal (914), Nammakal (915), Madurai (929) and Dharmapuri (955).

Sex Ratio – Juvenile Population (JSR)

The problem appears all the more acute, when one looks at the sex ratio for the juvenile population (0-6 years age group) in the State. The time series data below on juvenile sex ratios (JSR) in Tamilnadu (1961-1991) are indeed very revealing.

JSRs in Tamilnadu Districts

Districts	1961 0-4 yrs	1971 0-4 yrs	1981 0-4 yrs	1991 0-6yrs
Dharmapuri	-	993	955	905
Madurai	988	981	970	918
Salem	990	966	900	849
Thiruvannamalai				964
Dindigul	-	-	-	934
North Arcot (Vellore)	998	988	999	962
South Arcot	1017	981	973	970
Pudukottai	-	-	999	976
Periyar	-	-	964	929
Coimbatore	987	978	969	966
Chidambaranar	—	-	-	964
Kanyakumari	966	978	997	970
Nilgiris	998	985	987	968
Thanjavur	997	984	987	965
Tiruchirapalli	1005	994	969	955
Kamarajar				946
Chengai	1015	986	996	970
Nagapattinam				958
Tirunelveli	986	995	973	955
P.M.Thevar				958
Ramanathapuram	995	998	969	960
Chennai	976	969	987	962
Tamilnadu	995	984	974	948

(“Female infanticide in Tamilnadu some evidence”,
Search bulletin (July-Sept. 1998)

Blocks of Tamilnadu with low Juvenile sex ratio

District	Total Blocks	No. of blocks with 0-6 sex ratio <900
Dharmapuri	18	8
Madurai	21	10
Salem	35	23
Dindigul	14	2
Periyar	20	3

(Census of India 1991)

1. For the 0-6 population, Tamilnadu figure of 948 is slightly above the Indian average of 945, but there is a general tendency for juvenile sex ratios in Tamilnadu to decline.
2. In 3 districts (Salem, Dharmapuri and Madurai), the decline is exceptionally sharp. The three districts - Salem (849), Dharmapuri (905) and Madurai (918) have reported very low values. Salem district has, in fact, the dubious distinction of having the lowest juvenile sex ratio of 849 among all the districts in the country.
3. As the second table shows, the 3 districts of Salem (23), Dharmapuri (8) and Madurai (10) account for 41 out of the 46 blocks in Tamilnadu with a rural sex ratio of 900 or less.
4. In Periyar and Dindigul, the ratios are well below the State average, though higher than the above 3 districts. The 5 blocks in Tamilnadu with sex ratio of less than 900, not accounted by the above 3 districts, belong to Periyar and Dindigul.

The incidence of higher mortality among females of all ages due to neglect of their health need and other adverse social factors contributes to a negative sex ratio. The general decline in juvenile sex ratios is surely related to the greater access to better health care that male infants have than female infants do, arising from the general patriarchal norms prevalent in society.

Female Infant Mortality Rate (FIMR)

A related factor to the declining sex ratio is the higher female IMRs, under various causes of death. The State average of the infant mortality, with its male IMR of 36.9 and a higher female IMR of 44.3, surely confirms the fact.

Salem District has the dubious distinction of having the lowest juvenile sex ratio of 849 among all the districts in the country

Among the districts of Tamilnadu, 11 districts showed a higher female IMRs compared to males. Very high female IMRs have been reported in the districts of Dharmapuri, Madurai and Salem. Significantly it is these districts, which are known for their high incidence of female infanticide

In terms of projected levels of female IMRs during 1996-2001, Tamilnadu (with 44.35) was second best in the country, behind Kerala (9), compared to the national average of 64. But, as in the case of general Infant mortality rates, neonatal mortality rates among female children remains abnormally high.

And the rural female IMR in the State was as high as 55.2 in 1998, according to VES 1999. Still worse, it was as high as 123.2 in Salem, 116.4 in Dharmapuri and 88.3 in Theni. Other districts reporting high rural female IMR include Namakkal (63.9) Dindigul (62.9) and Madurai (60.7).

Among the districts of Tamilnadu, 11 districts showed a higher female IMRs compared to males. Very high female IMRs have been reported in the districts of Dharmapuri (100.1), Madurai (70.1) and Salem (85.4). Significantly it is these districts, which are known for their high incidence of female infanticide.

IMRs in Tamilnadu Districts		
District	Infant Mortality Rate	
	Male	Female
Dharmapuri	45.0	100.1
Madurai	39.7	70.0
Salem	43.7	85.4
Ramnad	46.6	42.4
Dindigul	43.1	52.9
Trichy	38.4	38.8
Perambalur	37.5	35.9
Villupuram	33.7	34.6
N. Arcot Ambedkar	38.1	45.0
S A Vallalar	34.2	33.3
Karur	33.6	33.2
Tirunelveli	43.3	38.5
Thriuvannamalai	31.7	39.2
P M Thevar	33.4	27.2
Periyar	37.7	38.9
Pudukottai	35.4	35.6
The Nilgiris	36.0	37.5
Chengai MGR	28.4	25.4
Thanjavur	31.3	27.8
Kamarajar	43.5	36.5
Chidambaranar	42.4	34.6
Nagai	35.8	32.4
Coimbatore	31.4	29.0
Kanyakumari	14.7	14.6
Tamilnadu	36.9	44.35

(Search Bulletin, July-September 1998)

Female Infanticide (FI) in Tamilnadu

Existence of female infanticide in many States, including Tamilnadu, is often neither officially acknowledged nor seriously dealt with. In Tamilnadu, thousands of infants seem to be killed every year. In 1998, as per PHC records, 3226 infants were killed. And the killings seem to be concentrated in a core region of 6 districts - Salem, Dharmapuri, Namakkal, Theni, Dindigul and Madurai - and to a lesser extent, in adjoining Karur, Erode and Vellore districts – totally involving around 130 mostly contiguous development blocks in all in Tamilnadu.

The following table presents the distribution of blocks by number of female infanticide deaths, as per PHC records.

Blocks by Number of FI Deaths

District	Blocks	FI Blocks	FI Deaths
Dharmapuri	18	14	1199
Madurai	21	19	571
Salem	35	28	1033
Thiruvannamalai	18	2	2
Dindigul	14	14	129
Villupuram	22	5	11
North Arcot	20	9	177
Perambalur	10	1	1
S A Vallalar	13	1	1
Pudukottai	13	1	3
Periyar	20	4	69
Karur	8	5	13
Tiruchy	14	3	11
Kamarajar	11	1	5
Chengai	27	1	1
Tamilnadu	386	105	3226

(Search Bulletin, July 1998)

- Out of 386 blocks in the State, as many as 105 blocks reported some occurrence of female infanticide.
- 53 out of these 105 blocks (roughly half) reported more than 10 female deaths. At the other end, just 7 blocks report female infanticide deaths exceeding 100 each, and together account for 1.092 female deaths out of total of 3,218 female infanticide deaths in the entire State.
- Of these 7, one was in Salem (Idappadi) while the other 6 were all in Dharmapuri.
- Another 16 blocks, mostly from Salem (nine blocks) and Madurai (Five blocks), each with Infanticide deaths exceeding 50 but below 100, account for 1.123 deaths.

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- Thus 23 blocks account for practically 70% of all female infanticide in Tamilnadu in 1995 as per PHC records.
- Finally 53 blocks where the incidence of female infanticide is sporadic, but which clearly signal the grave danger of a further and far wider spread non-core districts enter the picture here: Chengai, Kamarajar, Karur, south Arcot Vallalar, Villupuram, Pudukkottai, Tiruchirappalli and Thiruvannamalai Sambuvarayar, Karur, more or less at the midpoint of the female infanticide belt, is especially vulnerable. 7 of its 13 blocks report female infanticide.

Medical advancement in the form of Scan Centres has become hostile to the female children as female feticide takes place after scanning the sex of the baby in the womb. The fast growth of scan centres especially in the female infanticide prone areas of Tamilnadu, clearly confirms the involvement of scan centers in such female killings. As of May 31,1999 there were about 5000 scan centres in Tamilnadu.

The scan centres which are used for sex detection and which await registration have to be denied registration and to be closed immediately. Towards strict monitoring of the 1994 Pre natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, a regulatory medical authority needs to be set up at the State level.

The medical practitioners who violate the law on scan centers should be severely punished.

Female Literacy & Education in Tamilnadu

Female literacy is not only an end itself, but also serves as a catalyst for overall performance in major social development sectors, including general literacy performance.

Year	Total	Male	Female
1951	20.85	31.73	10.06
1961	31.41	44.54	18.17
1971	39.46	51.78	26.36
1981	46.76	58.26	34.99
1991	63.72	74.88	51.30
1997	70.00	80.00	60.00

(TN Literacy Scenario-At a Glance)

Female literacy levels in Tamilnadu have grown over the decades, from 10.06% in 1951 to 52.59% in 1991. General literacy levels of women in Tamilnadu have been always above the national average. In 1997, as per the NSSO Survey, while the female literacy rate for India was 50%, Tamilnadu had a higher rate of 60%.

Comparing Tamilnadu with the other States, in 1991, in terms of percentage of literate females above 7 years, Tamilnadu had the second best record in India, with 51.3% (behind Kerala with 86.2%), compared to the Indian average of 39.3%.

Even though, female literacy levels in Tamilnadu have grown considerably from 1981 to 1991, shooting up from 35% in 1981 to 51% in 1991, the gender gap between male and female literacy rates has continued. Female literacy rates in the past decades have stood below the male literacy rate. The need to narrow down the gap is urgent.

Literacy (Gender Differentials)

General	62.07%
Male	73.70%
Female	51.30%

Sectoral variations within female literacy rates too are quite striking. In particular literacy levels among dalit, tribal and rural women have remained significantly low, compared to the average female literacy levels in the State.

Female Literacy (sectoral variations)

Women (total)	51.3%
Rural women	44.00%
Dalit women	34.89%
Tribal women	20.23%

(Statistical Handbook of Tamilnadu 1998)

Similarly, inter-districts imbalances in literacy levels continue and are very striking. The female literacy level ranges from 34% in Dharmapuri to 78% in Kanyakumari.

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Sectoral and Inter-districts variations in female literacy too are quite striking

TRENDS IN LITERACY RATE (%) BY DISTRICTS

Districts	Male	Female	Combined
Chennai	88	75	82
Kancheepuram & Thiruvallur	77	52	66
Cuddalore & Villupuram	66	40	53
Vellore	73	49	61
Tiruvannamalai	67	40	53
Dharmapuri	57	34	46
Salem & Namakkal	65	41	53
Erode	66	42	54
Coimbatore	76	54	66
Dindugal	69	44	57
Madurai & Theni	78	55	66
Nilgiris	82	61	72
Pudukkottai	71	44	58
Tiruchirapalli, Karur & Perambalur	73	49	61
Ramanathapuram	75	49	62
Virudhunagar	76	50	63
Sivagangai	77	50	63
Thanjavur, Nagapattinam & Thiruvarur	77	55	66
Tirunelveli	77	54	66
Thoothukudi	82	65	73
Kanniyakumari	86	78	82
Tamilnadu	74	51	63

(Statistical Handbook of Tamil Nadu, 1998)

In 1981, there were 14 districts that had literacy levels lower than the State average. By 1991, the number had increased to 16. While all the earlier 14 have continued to remain below average, Thiruvannamalai and Virudhunagar too had joined the list of districts with below State average literacy levels.

Districts below State Average Literacy

1981	1991
Cuddalore	Cuddalore
Dindugal	Dindugal
Dharmapuri	Dharmapuri
Erode	Erode
Karur	Karur
Namakkal	Namakkal
Perambalur	Perambalur
Pudukottai	Pudukottai
Ramanathapuram	Ramanathapuram
Salem	Salem
Sivagangai	Sivagangai
Tiruchy	Tiruchy
Vellore	Vellore
Villupuram	Villupuram
	Thiruvannamalai
	Virudunagar

Thus, even though the general female literacy levels have been steadily increasing in the State, sectoral and inter-district variations clearly show that the general female literacy rates in the State do not reflect the overall development of women in the area of literacy in Tamilnadu.

Female Dropouts

Even though the Govt has claimed 93.35% enrolment of girls in primary schools, the continuing phenomenon of high levels of dropouts is indeed a cause for serious concern. It is important to recognize the fragility of the school attendance process. In other words, there are many obstacles for girls to continue their education with regular attendance.

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Dropout Rate (%) of Girls in Tamilnadu

Year	Upto Primary 1-5 years	Upto Middle 1-8 years	Upto High School 1-10 years	Upto Hr.Sec. 1-12 years
1984-85	25.28	64.51	80.87	90.70
1985-86	25.20	62.23	79.71	90.00
1986-87	25.06	57.83	78.59	89.64
1987-88	24.46	53.14	77.32	85.84
1988-89	24.01	51.35	76.45	88.58
1989-90	23.64	50.65	73.85	87.98
1990-91	22.68	49.43	72.63	86.60
1991-92	21.16	46.50	71.93	86.07
1992-93	19.62	43.54	71.02	85.39
1993-94	18.35	41.20	69.85	84.28
1994-95	17.65	39.36	69.15	84.19
1995-96	16.97	37.11	68.20	83.65
1996-97	16.20	34.78	67.05	83.09
1997-98	16.18	34.64	65.74	82.54
1998-99	16.15	33.37	58.35	80.61

(Policy Note on Education 1999-2000, GOTN)

While the dropout rate of girls at the primary stage has decreased from 25.20% in 1984-85 to 16.15% in 1998-99, the dropout rates accelerate very sharply at the higher levels, reaching up to 33.37% at the middle stage, to 58.35% at higher education stage and to 82.54% at the higher secondary education levels. This trend has prevailed during the past several years as illustrated on the above table.

Dropout rates of girls have also been higher than the dropout rates of boys. For example, while the dropout rate of boys at higher secondary stage was 77.54% in 1997-98, the rate for girls was a much higher 82.54% in the same year. (Statistical Hand Book of Tamilnadu 1998).

It is important that Government works out concrete policy approaches to ensure that the continuing gender bias in its educational endeavour and programmes is diminished and eliminated.

Women and Health in Tamilnadu

The health status of women is one of the crucial elements in the assessment of the quality and development of their life

“The health care of women (in Tamilnadu) has improved since 1995 in urban areas. Access to health information, health services counselor’s etc. has increased largely in urban areas. In rural areas it is not adequate enough. It was felt that there was a lack of people’s participation in health programmes, coupled with inadequate funding on the part of the government and an over-emphasis on paperwork, rather than implementation.”

- UNICEF report on Beijing+5 Consultation, TN

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Maternal Health

Anti-natal care was available to 81.1% of pregnant mothers in Tamilnadu, as per the Multi Indicator Survey 1995. The birth rate (CBR) in rural areas for 1995 is 21 as per the DPH survey. Mean age at marriage is reported to be 21 and the couple protection rate 55.5 as per figures from the Directorate of Family Welfare (Profile of Districts of Tamilnadu, UNICEF, Chennai, 1996, p.4).

Estimates of maternal mortality rates for earlier years are not readily available. As per VES 1999, the rate has come down, from 376 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 1992 (India: 453) to 150 in 1998. Maternal mortality rate was high in the Nilgiris, Perambalur, Trichy and Sivagangai districts.

Medical Attention to Mothers at delivery (%) 1992 –93										
	Year	Institutional			Attended By Trained Professionals			Attended by Others		
		Tot.	Rural	Urban	Tot.	Rural	Urban	Tot.	Rural	Urban
Tamilnadu	1992	56.9	46.6	90.4	20.22	4.3	7.0	22.9	29.2	2.6
	1993	61.3	47.8	95.2	19.12	5.1	4.1	19.6	27.1	0.7
India	1992	24.4	18.0	54.8	22.9	21.8	28.0	52.7	60.2	17.2
	1993	24.5	20.2	56.5	24.3	23.3	31.6	51.3	56.5	11.8

(“Women in Tamilnadu, A Profile”, 1997)

40% of deaths related to the child birth and pregnancy, in Tamilnadu in 1993 were due to Anemia

In all types of medical assistance to mothers at delivery, such as Institutional and non institutional, women of Tamilnadu are better placed as the State's rate of medical attention received by mothers is higher than the national levels.

But, of course severe rural-urban differences persist. While 95.2% of the mothers in urban areas receive institutional assistance for deliveries, only 47.8% receive such assistance in rural areas.

On the other hand, only 0.7% of urban women opt for the assistance of untrained medical practitioner for their delivery. But, a large 26% of rural women seek the assistance of untrained professional.

These, indeed, are indications that medical services in Tamilnadu reach rural and urban areas very disproportionately.

According to the survey of causes of deaths, 40% of deaths related to the child birth and pregnancy in the year 1993 is due to Anemia (Statistical Hand Book of Tamilnadu 1998). These deaths could be prevented if proper medical assistance is offered.

The Government needs to develop and use qualitative and quantitative data and disaggregated variables such as sex, age and other demographic criteria, towards effecting gender impact assessments of its health programmes

To make the health care and medical facilities accessible to rural women, the Government needs to introduce Health Insurance Policy with subsidies.

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Women and Work in Tamilnadu

Work participation (%) in Tamilnadu			
		1991	1993-94
Rural	Male	58.28	60.1
	Female	38.50	47.8
Urban	Male	52.78	57.4
	Female	13.10	22.8

(Statistical Hand Book of Tamilnadu, 1998)

Women in Tamilnadu, who constitute 49% of the total population, accounted for 30% of total workers according to the 1991 census. According to NSS survey in 1993-94, the workforce of women in Tamilnadu (rural: 47.8%, urban:22.8%) is higher than the national average(rural: 32.8%, urban: 15.4%). And the work participation of women in Tamilnadu has increased over the years.

In the organized sector employment, the share of women had increased from 14.6% in 1970 to 15.9% in 1980 to 21.2% in 1990 and to 28.1% in 1996-97. As on 31 March 1997, a total number of 7.2 lakhs women were employed in the organised sector, 4.0 lakhs of them in the public sector and 3.2 lakhs in private sector.

In rural areas, while the work participation of men had decreased from 59.24% in 1981 to 58.28% in 1991, that of women had increased considerably from 33.55% in 1981 to 38.50% in 1991. In urban areas too, the female work participation had increased. Compared to the urban female workforce, the rural female workforce has witnessed a sharp increase.

While increase in work participation of women has to be acknowledged, the types of works undertaken by women bring out clearly the subservient position of women at work in Tamilnadu.

While the share of women in work participation in Tamilnadu has increased, the types of works undertaken by women bring out clearly the subservient position of women at work in Tamilnadu

The rapid reduction in female employment with rise in incomes points to the almost negligible presence of rural women with assured earnings

The following table indicates industries, which employed more females than males. These industries surely are not highly rewarding; some of them even create serious health hazards.

Work Areas	Women employed
Bidi Manufacturing	60%
Cotton Mills	59%
Cotton Spinning	79%
Manufacturing of Matches	70%
Cashew nut Processing	84%
Canning, Preserving & Processing Fish	52%

(Statistical Handbook of Tamilnadu 1998)

The subservient nature of women's work participation levels becomes even more strikingly clear, when we compare their participation rates vis-à-vis men, in terms of different rural household income groups.

Work Participation rates in rural Household income groups

	up to Rs 20,000	Rs 20000 - Rs 40000	Rs 40000 -Rs 60000	Above Rs 60000
Men	84.4%	82.8%	80.2%	85.5%
Women	41.5%	42.2%	38.7%	37.7%

(India Human Development Report, 1999)

1. The above table clearly points out the discouraging employment profile for women in rural areas. The gender bias in employment is evident in the consistently higher employment figures for men than women.
2. In all the income groups, the men's levels of employment are more than double those of women. Moreover the high variation characterizing female employment is missing from the data for men, implying a consistent bias in favor of male employment, irrespective of income levels.
3. The rapid reduction in female employment with rise in income, points to the almost negligible presence of rural women with assured earnings.
4. Female employment is visualized as a means for bridging the resource gap in households. Higher work participation of women in households having lower incomes, indicates greater absorption in wage employment.

Women's work participation mostly goes unrecorded and unrecognised. According to a sample survey conducted in 10 districts of Tamilnadu, males spend more than double the time spent by females on SNA (System of National Account) activities. On the contrary, in extended-SNA activities, men spend only one-tenth of the time spent by women. A bulk of about 72% of the surveyed hours are filled by non-SNA activities like personal care and maintenance in which women are mainly involved and which substantively contribute to the welfare of the households. Also, even among the SNA activities in Tamilnadu, nearly 27% are accounted for by 'unpaid activities' performed by family labour. (The Hindu, Sep 27, 2000).

Women's access to many important areas in industry, is constrained by their low levels of literacy, education and technical skills. The unemployment rate among women has been a matter of concern. The forced unemployment of women has made women to migrate to cities and work as daily wagers and to take up menial jobs in companies. The young migrant girls often face the threat of sexual harassment and ill treatment.

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Violence Against Women

“ Violence against women should be viewed as one of the most crucial social mechanisms by which they are forced into a subordinate position. It is a manifestation of unequal power relations, which has led to men's domination over and discrimination against women. Thus violence against women, throughout their life, comes to be socially sanctified”

**- Ninth Five Year Plan Report of
the Working Group on Women's Development**

Over the past decade, there has been a growing awareness of this disturbing phenomenon, and its long-term impact on the development and empowerment of women.

There are hardly any systematic efforts to document cases of violence on women in Tamilnadu. The minimal cases collected by Peoples' Watch – Tamilnadu, as reported in the press are surely just the tip of the iceberg, but they reveal the patterns of violence against women in Tamilnadu.

Violence against women (1999)

Month	Suicide	Murder	Sexual	Molestation	Dowry	Eve teasing	Other
January	9	6	5	1	-	3	2
February	14	6	5	-	4	3	3
March	19	11	7	1	7	1	7
April	25	16	5	-	11	1	2
May	12	12	2	1	4	-	-
June	26	11	-	-	6	1	2
July	23	11	3	-	8	1	2
August	34	12	-	1	2	1	1
September	30	20	12	5	4	1	1
October	19	12	12	-	7	-	3
November	26	13	5	1	1	-	2
December	21	15	9	-	7	2	-
Total	258	145	65	10	61	14	25

(Thamizhagathil Manitha Urimaigal 1998-2000, PW- TN)

The study reveals that the crimes connected to women are interlinked. For example, sexual harassment, eve teasing and molestation often end in either murder or suicide. Among the total 582 instances of violence against women, 191 are related to dowry related violence.

Among the 65 instances related to sexual harassment recorded, a high 54 were related to the age group of 15-25 years. This clearly reveals that the victims of sexual harassment are mostly adolescent girls or newly married women.

Of the 61 cases of dowry reported, most of the victims belonged to the age group of 15-25 years.

Among the 258 cases of suicide deaths, 211 of the victims were married women. Of the 145 cases of murder, as many as 126 cases were related to married women. These high figures are clear pointers to a high incidence of domestic violence on women in Tamilnadu. There is no separate legislation that relates to domestic violence. Cultural conditioning ensures that most of the cases of domestic violence go unreported.

An article published by The Hindu (February 4th 1999) reported that violence during pregnancy was not uncommon. Injuries ranged from plain beating to starvation, injuries to the eye to confinement. A recent study shows that, as per hospital records in Tamilnadu, over 13% of the medical legal cases admitted were due to domestic violence. Closer examination of records showed that another 38% of women undergoing treatment for injuries were victims of violence at home but not reported to the police. It also stated that violence against women causes more death and disability in the 15-44 age group than by Cancer, Malaria, traffic accidents all put together.

It is paradox to note that in spite of the large number of cases of reported violence against women in Tamilnadu, it's women in Tamilnadu, more than any other State, who have filled up the jails most. As per an official statement in the Parliament in May 2000, of the 8826 women kept in jails all over the country, Tamilnadu had the highest number (1658).

According to the report of the Peoples Watch, Tamilnadu Government has plans to sensitize police force and revenue officials and constitute a special court to try the cases related to women. The State has to realize the urgency of the issue and implement its proposed plans immediately.

The legislating and implementing authorities need to be sensitized to women's empowerment perspectives, in handling issues of women's rights.

Both the persons who are involved in fixing dowry and those who receive dowry are to be punished by law. They should be given at least 3 to 7 years of imprisonment.

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Women and Governance

Though the Indian Constitution, through the instrument of adult franchise and Article 15 which prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex, guarantees political equality to women, such political equality is hardly exercised by the women of India and Tamilnadu.

The 73rd Amendment of the Indian Constitution, by legislating for a compulsory 33% reservation for women in all local governing bodies, has brought about a significant change in the scene.

Participation of women in local governing bodies

Local Bodies	Total	Women			
		SC	ST	General	Total
Districts Panchayats					
Chair persons	28	2	-	8	10
Members	648	54	-	171	225
Panchayat Union					
Chair Persons	385	32	-	107	139
Members	6499	534	11	1750	2295
Village Panchayats					
Presidents	12617	1078	33	3153	4264
Members	97398	6297	258	26250	32805

(Rural Development Report Govt of TN, 1999)

As per the above figures,

- At the village Panchayats level, women form 33.68% of members and hold 33.80% of presidents' positions
- At the Panchayat Union level, they form 35.31% of members and hold 36.10% of chairpersons' positions
- At the District Panchayat level, they form 34.72% of members and hold 35.71% of chairpersons' positions.

But, in other levels of political power and decision making, the situation of women remain dismally low, both in the country and in Tamilnadu.

- Among the 27 male ministers in the State, there are just 2 women ministers
- Among the 18 MPs from Tamilnadu in the Rajyasabha, only one is a woman
- Among the 39 MPs from Tamilnadu in the Loksabha, only one is a woman.
- Among the 235 members of the Tamilnadu Legislative Assembly, only 12 are women.

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The uniform reluctance, on the part of all political parties, to give women their due share in political power at different levels, surely needs to be condemned and challenged.

The Tamilnadu State Government should play a pioneering role in ensuring equal opportunities and representations to women at all the formal and informal bodies and committees that come into the purvey of the State Government.

Government Programmes and Schemes

“From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards there has been marked shift in the approach to women’s issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women.”

- Ninth Five Year Plan Report of the working group on women’s development

The traditional programmes of women’s welfare undertaken by the Tamilnadu Government have been mostly at the level of social assistance, such as for widows’ pensions, marriage grants etc. In the early 1960’s, mahalir mandrams had been initiated with the view to propagate various Govt. schemes.

The setting up of the Tamilnadu Corporation for Development of Women (TCDW) has led to certain qualitative change in the type of schemes. The major programmes taken up by the State Govt. under TCDW, are 1) Mahalir Thittam (Mathi), 2) Vocational Training Programme (VTP), 3) Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP) and 4) Women Recreation Centres (WRC).

The social and financial recognition which the women are able to achieve within their families through their involvement in SHGs is an added positive fallout of the programme

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Tamilnadu

Self-Help Groups (SHGs), implemented under the Mahalir Thittam, have gained great importance over the years. Most of the development programmes of the Government are today implemented through the SHGs.

Originally initiated, in May 1989, in 75 blocks of 8 districts of Tamilnadu, with assistance from the International Fund for Agricultural development (IFAD), the programme today covers all the 368 blocks in the 28 districts of Tamilnadu (except Chennai).

As on September 2000, (as per the data of TCDW), the total number of SHGs in Tamilnadu, functioning in three phases, was 45719. The total number of women involved was 8,06,369, with the total amount of loans given being Rs.10, 33, 541/-. Repayment rate was a high 96%.

Although it is too early to assess the impact of SHGs, regarding the empowerment of rural women in Tamilnadu, the overall enthusiasm has been striking. According to the TWDC, even districts with low demographic indicators like Madurai, Dharmapuri, Salem have fared well in establishing SHGs. And TCDW has claimed that 46.66% of the beneficiaries of the programme are SC/ST women.

The social and financial recognition which the women are able to achieve within their families through their involvement in SHGs is an added positive fallout of the programme.

A recent field sample study done for IFAD in 24 SHGs of varied grades in 8 villages in the 3 districts of Dharmapuri, Ramanathapuram and Madurai, though limited in its range of analysis, brings out the following trends:

- Approximately 68% of the members of the 24 SHGs were below the poverty line at the time of group formations
- 43% belonged to very poor households.
- 21.5% of the members belonged to women-headed households
- 21% of the members belonged to dalit households

The critical analyses of SHGs in Tamilnadu, done by the above study, are indeed very significant

- Though the SHGs offer loans to women for development, the amount of loan is so small that it cannot offer sustainable investment or help for asset creation.
- Although the schemes lay special emphasis on widows, destitutes, the handicapped, divorcees and social backward classes, the implementation process does not guarantee any special provision to these sections. Further, the impact of the schemes make no reference to single women and women who head families.
- There is no focus on particular categories of women headed households (deserted women, eligible widows heading households, women managing households because of male sickness and settled single women, women from landless households, unskilled women laborers and women with disabilities.)
- Targeting, particularly to the backward households, may require greater attention
- Since most of the Govt schemes are implemented through the SHGs, villages and households that do not belong to SHGs are deprived of the benefits.
- SHGs need to directly address gender-specific causes of poverty; otherwise the gains to women (in male-headed households) may be contingent upon male support and short lived.

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Among the strategies and suggestions with regard to SHGs that are most valuable are:

- Promoting joint ownership of land, and houses.
- Collective purchasing, marketing and storage service centers, and value –addition production activities.
- Strengthening literacy and technical skills of women and linking women’s group to corporate industries
- Provision of loans for purchase of drudgery reduction equipments like gas-stoves for women
- Increasing women’s participation in markets and non-traditional domains

SHGs need to directly address gender-specific causes of poverty, otherwise the gains to women may be short-lived

Policy Recommendations

- The State Government needs to work out a specific and comprehensive gender policy, concretely expressing its vision, commitments, programmes and monitoring mechanisms, with the view to ensuring gender equality, justice and elimination of all forms of discrimination in all planning and programmes.
- There is an urgent need for all development programmes of the government to consciously make a shift to a “Rights approach” in all spheres relating to women’s welfare. The various schemes need to stop seeing women as mere beneficiaries. Rather efforts must be made to view the schemes on the basis of rights, such as women’s’ right to survival, right to land and natural resources, right to education, right to equal wages, right to employment, right to information and right to social security.
- The Tamilnadu State Women’s Commission has hardly any focus, power or resources to make meaningful interventions towards safeguarding and nurturing the rights of women in Tamilnadu. The Commission needs to be totally revamped, with sufficient executive power and financial strength.
- The clubbing of women with children, the disabled etc in a single department of social welfare leads to certain minimizing of special focus to be given to women. The establishment of an independent Department of Women’s Welfare is an urgent need.

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